Community Action and Urban Forestry in Business Districts

Kathleen L. Wolf, Ph.D.
Center for Urban Horticulture
University of Washington
Seattle, Washington

Abstract

Aided by fiscal and technical assistance from the Puget Sound Urban Resources Partnership, two "nature and culture" projects were completed in Seattle's Chinatown International District. How do we measure the success of such community action projects? How does the urban forest benefit revitalizing business districts? Social and community impacts are reviewed and suggestions offered for including human dimensions in accountability measures.

Neighborhood business districts, despite the flight to the suburbs, are entering a phase of renewal in many American cities. Many factors contributed to the demographic movement from the inner city core to surrounding countryside. Associated economic disinvestment eroded the vitality of local business centers. Many local commercial districts, despite a dire history of prosperity followed by abandonment, are working toward revival. Loyal groups of residents and business owners, often representing diverse cultural backgrounds, are rebuilding their economic and civic destinies.

Various government programs and initiatives have been launched to assist revitalizing neighborhoods and business districts. Grant programs have addressed the following needs: physical improvements, improved economic opportunities, public and social services, good public schools and improved public safety. Recently, the federal government has added natural resources programs to the inner-city aid agenda.

The Urban Resources Partnership was launched in 1994 as a coalition of seven federal agencies partnering to address urban natural resources issues. Through cooperative activities, involving federal partners and local participants, urban resource needs are being addressed by community-based projects to improve social, natural and economic conditions. Seattle, Washington was chosen to be one of four pilot demonstration cities.

Seattle's partnership, the Puget Sound Urban Resources Partnership (PSURP), has committed pass-through grant funds and technical assistance based on a project application basis. In 1996, Seattle's Chinatown International District (CID) was chosen as a demonstration project site.

The potential was exciting! A city-wide comprehensive planning process was launched in 1995, with 38 neighborhoods mobilizing to prepare neighborhood action plans. Local plans, including the CID's effort, will be integrated to prepare a comprehensive plan that guides the City of Seattle into the next century.

Wolf, K. L. 1998. Community Action and Urban Forestry in Business Districts. In M. Ozonoff (ed.) *Common Challenges and Shared Solutions in Urban and Community Forestry: Proceedings of the Best of the West Summit.* Davis, CA: USFS Pacific Southwest Research Station.

The CID is a revitalizing neighborhood, striving to recover from an eroding business base, increasing crime rates and historic culturally biased governmental actions. Today, trees are planted, public art is displayed and a draft neighborhood plan includes significant attention to "nature and culture" needs. All of this has been made possible by community collaboration and partnership with federal and local PSURP partners.

As results and outcomes are reported one considers questions of evaluation and accountability. The tangible products – trees and art – are significant yet the more consequential impacts may be the socio-cultural dynamics of community action. These are more difficult to assess yet may be the most relevant indicators of success produced by federal resources dispensed in urban neighborhoods and business districts.

In the next section, the partnership projects and process will be described, since sharing success stories can perhaps reduce the "learning curve" for other communities embarking on a similar process. The socio-cultural benefits will be discussed in another section, suggesting some criteria for evaluation of community projects and the need to expand the concept of accountability.

Projects and Process

In 1996, Seattle's Chinatown International District began to prepare its neighborhood action plan. An earlier effort, the 1992 CID Development Plan, addressed many of the district's needs, though open space planning received little attention. Scoping studies for the current plan revealed strong interest in having more "nature" in the district. Both technical and financial assistance (a $30,000 grant) were allocated by PSURP to aid the district. In addition, representatives of the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program and the University of Washington's Center for Urban Horticulture served as PSURP's scoping agents and liaisons.

The CID is a culturally diverse and dynamic downtown, residential and small business neighborhood, founded early in Seattle's history. Chinese, Japanese, Philippine, Vietnamese and, more recently, Russian and Ukrainian cultures are represented. Its business community contains about 300 businesses; most are small, independent enterprises concentrated in the retail restaurant sector. A high concentration of poverty characterizes households and residents; at least one-half to two-thirds of most ethnic populations in the district are below poverty levels.

The looming forces of downtown and regional development offer possibilities of improvement of these conditions, yet also test the CID's resilience and community spirit. It's people – immigrant pioneers, residents, Asian family associations, businesses and community agencies – face a crossroads of opportunities and apprehensions. While original founders were Chinese and Japanese the district has served as an entry point for many immigrant groups throughout the decades. An example is the Little Saigon business dis-

trict, created by Vietnamese merchants. Community leaders ponder how growth, particularly in the private sector, can be guided and directed so that development contributes constructively to the community's future.

PSURP's collaborations started with creation of an open space planning committee. The promise of being able to do an on-the-ground project attracted participants. InterIm, a not-for-profit community development association, provided administrative support and leadership for the committee which included local design professionals, social services staff, small business owners, city planning staff and economic development specialists. This group, in effect, was able to jump-start the planning process, providing leadership for the neighborhood plan rather than playing catch-up, which is so often the case for green space issues in revitalizing districts.

The "Nature and Culture" committee started by assessing the conditions of the existing, limited open space sites and identifying new opportunities. In the course of the analysis project ideas began to emerge. A recognized need was a way to visually and functionally link two business sectors, the Chinatown core and Little Saigon.

In time four projects were defined. The committee, committed to community outreach, presented the options to community vote during a summer street festival. Booth visitors were given sticky dots and encouraged to vote for two choices on graphic display boards. The votes were overwhelmingly in favor of two projects – a street tree planting and public art project. The Vietnamese sector would receive new trees. A colonnade painting concept, developed by an artist for the CID Business Improvement Association, was slated for the support columns of the freeway overpass that bisects the district.

Each project became an opportunity to expand the partnership and open new communications channels. Little Saigon merchants, after years of informal collaboration, quickly formalized a small business association to address the administrative needs of the urban forest planting. The association expanded its relationship with other cultural business organizations in the district. This coalition finalized the details of the public art column painting, coming to consensus on color scheme and graphic detailing. These negotiations spawned efforts to leverage the PSURP grant award, successfully expanding the scope of both projects with additional external resources.

In October 1997, flowering cherry trees were planted in Little Saigon with the help of more than one hundred volunteers. Members of the Seattle City Council, regional managers of federal resources agencies and Jim Lyons, Assistant Secretary of the Department of the Interior, helped dedicate the living investment. Local government agencies contributed technical assistance and strong backs. After a dedication ceremony, including a blessing of the trees by a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, people of diverse ages and cultural backgrounds worked shoulder to shoulder to plant a new urban forest.

Column painting also began in Autumn 1997. After early technical complications were remedied painting resumed, and the project was completed in

June 1998. Both projects raised awareness of the business associations regarding the value of "nature and culture" improvements.

Other partners stepped forward. In March 1998, a "Picture I.D." design workshop was sponsored by the state chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects to give visual, graphic expression to green space and street improvements ideas. Many of the visioning graphics are being used in the final comprehensive plan. Finally, the Student Conservation Association chose the CID to be a focus site for green space improvements during the city-wide Earthworks volunteer event in April 1998.

The district's needs are many and urgent – economic development, crime control, sanitation, and improved and affordable housing. Given the myriad needs open space may not have been a high priority in the neighborhood planning process. Yet, a strategically timed resource commitment, delivered by committed partners made open space and urban forestry issues a higher priority AND promoted their inclusion in the final plan as an integrated collection of substantial improvements. In addition, greater public awareness of natural resource agencies has happened within a traditionally underserved community. Finally, the initial partnership has expanded and includes more functional dimensions. Partners are on call to offer expertise for the implementation actions that will follow adoption of the International District's comprehensive plan.

Measuring Success?

The question, "Are community partnerships succeeding?" is often asked by officials in federal, state and local government agencies. Judgments about program effectiveness can be made in many ways. Formal evaluations or informal reviews can only provide conclusions about success based on stated objectives of a partnership and projects it supports. The mission of PSURP is to promote sustainable, community-based projects centered on urban natural resources in underserved communities. These elements reflect the intentions of many recent initiatives by Federal resource agencies, such as EPA's Community-Based Environmental Protection program. What are the intentions and goals of such programs? How do we effectively measure their success?

Generally, we can measure performance – defined here as the numeric counts of project units that are expended to achieve a project's objectives. For instance, CID project tallies tell us the number of trees planted or hours donated by a painting contractor. Impacts should also be evaluated! These are the long term, durable, perhaps community-wide changes that ensue from the interaction of people, agencies, organizations and nature. Impacts are typically more complex, and consequently, usually more difficult and expensive to measure than performance.

Accountability standards have become institutionalized. For instance, federal agencies are held accountable by the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993. The USDA Forest Service has responded with a

Performance Measures Accountability System (PMAS). Achievement measures for the Urban and Community Forestry program – committed to "vital cities and communities through healthy and sustainable urban forests" – include the number and developmental maturity of community forestry programs, as well as tallies of distribution of technical and financial assistance.

These benchmarks are a beginning but many dimensions make up both community vitality AND healthy urban forests. While it remains to be seen whether the urban forest of Seattle's Chinatown International District will become healthy and sustainable we shouldn't overlook the immediate contributions of these projects to community vitality. In the CID, many beneficial impacts are socio-cultural rather than environmental. The open space planning and urban resources projects became a forum for many people to come together about shared needs and issues and begin a process of community self-help.

The book *Nature's Services* (Daily, 1997) describes human society's dependence on nature's functions and identifies the myriad of ecosystem services. Chapters focus on the services and benefits accrued from biophysical functions of ecosystems, such as biodiversity, freshwater systems, soil integrity and climate dynamics. What is not described, unfortunately, is the extensive research literature about psycho-social benefits associated with the human experience of nature. Nature's services for individual humans include stress reduction, improved convalescence and healing, enhanced worker productivity and job satisfaction and improved quality of life. Though less well studied, there are probably benefits to human social groups – from small organizations to entire communities.

Below are descriptions of the psycho-social dynamics surrounding the CID's green activities. They provide some preliminary ideas about the human dimensions that could be accounted for in future project evaluation models. The challenge is to further define these concepts and determine dimensionality, or the range of expression of the concepts, within a community action project.

Partnership Evolution

Partnering can be a significant problem-solving strategy for individuals and groups in neighborhood business districts. Local people are essential for neighborhood renewal and revitalization efforts but significant resources and expertise can be provided by external partners. Partnership success depends on strategic and purposeful use of the assets that each entity can provide. In addition, multicultural settings require attention to communication and understanding of social customs. Thus evaluative measures should look at both the internal functioning of a partnership within a local community and its relationship with partners whose domains extend beyond the district, and may include:

Partner equality – Are all partners' inputs and needs equally considered?

Local assets – Have the resources, key individuals and organizations of the local community been adequately assessed and drawn into the partnering process?

Process development – Has a communications process been established whereby issues, needs and differences of opinion can be identified, considered and resolved?

Partner identity – Are the roles and potential contributions of each partnering entity adequately defined, understood and respected?

Project adaptability – Are external partners willing and able to commit resources to local needs rather than a predetermined agenda or program?

Community Building

The economic perplexities of revitalizing business districts are multidimensional and complex. Many governmental and philanthropic initiatives have responded. Despite the dollars spent problems persist.

Inattention to community has been a failing of traditional initiatives (U.S. Senate, 1995). Each narrowly focused program has failed to acknowledge the coexistence of problems and have also viewed residents as passive recipients of treatment. Local citizens and institutions must be enlisted as partners in problem solving; failure to do so leaves essential resources untapped, ignores local priorities and misses opportunities to strengthen local communities' action capacity.

Bendick (1995) claims that community is a crucial but neglected resource for inner-city revitalization and that, "social capital is the attitudinal, behavioral, and communal glue that holds society together through relationships among individuals, families, and organizations. Without social capital to sustain problem solving within distressed communities and to link community residents to the broader society, efforts to address specific problems of individuals, families, and neighborhoods will make little progress."

Urban forestry, ostensibly, is about the science and management of trees and enhancement of the biophysical benefits they provide. Yet, tree and streetscape programs often become catalysts for community building. Tree programs have launched collaborative alliances, building trust among residents and businesses. Measures of success should evaluate community capacity to change and could include:

Decision structure – Has a forum been developed through green project planning that enables local residents and businesses to address other issues?

Needs identification – Are community-wide needs identified and prioritized so that requests for assistance are made with consistency and a unified voice?

Cost efficiencies – Has the community recognized cost savings through collective attention to district-wide needs rather than individualized expenses?

Display of pride – Is there a change in local attitude associated with the physical changes in parks or streetscape?

Future opportunities – Has planning enabled the community to quickly respond to future offers of technical or fiscal assistance through advance preparation?

Success stories – Are reports of the community's achievments being used to boost morale within the community and attract external support?

Consumer Environment

A primary and essential goal of most neighborhood revitalization programs is revenue enhancement. While community dynamics and relationships with external partners produce multiple benefits, the most salient improvement for business people is a boost in the bottom line. How do trees contribute to the consumer environment? Retail marketers have explored a myriad of factors to learn more about consumer behavior. Yet, one aspect is often overlooked – the influence of retail setting. Many retail districts within America's urban centers are striving to revitalize and regain their competitive capacity.

A recent study identified the costs and benefits associated with trees in revitalizing business districts (Wolf, 1998). Seattle's Chinatown International District was one study site for the survey research. The CID's needs and urban forest dynamics characterized the perceptions of other people in similar places, suggesting these measures of achievment:

Place planning – Has the community developed a vision, including goals and objectives, that can enhance the retail environment?

Tree costs and annoyances – Have "right tree, right place" practices been used to address the challenges and needs of tree growth in a commercial environment?

Tree amenities and benefits – Are business groups actively using green space to create imageable and pleasant spaces that become a competitive asset?

Business recruitment – Are physical improvements aiding the community to attract and retain new businesses?

Conclusion

New trees line a busy street in the City of Seattle, symbols of spring renewal and a pan-Asian cultural heritage. Freeway columns display painted fish and insects, symbols of Chinese and Vietnamese cultures. Both projects grace an emerging business district that faces many challenges. These trees, planned and planted by volunteers, represent extensive private and public

partnerships – some long-standing, some created for recent open space improvements. Seattle's Little Saigon is now a more beautiful place, and more welcoming to consumers.

Working with business districts (particularly in revitalizing areas) and multicultural groups presents unique challenges in urban forestry. Commerce and community can go hand in hand. We need to acknowledge and better understand the needs of diverse urban forestry audiences. Through community action we can assist business communities in building healthy, sustainable urban green systems. We can help people to build the social capital needed to address difficult issues. In turn, business people can become more effective and resourceful participants in the planning and management of our cities' green spaces.

The multiple benefits of urban resources programs are rarely fully measured. Accountability benchmarks should include impacts that positively influence the social and psychological texture of a community. What is success? How do we measure it? Our challenge is to expand definitions of achievement so that the intangibles of human ecology – such as consumer enhancements, community capacity-building and improved partnerships – are all part of the evaluation equation.

Acknowledgments

I thank the following project partners: Chinatown/International District Business Improvement Association, Vietnamese Merchant's Association, InterIm Community Development Association and Sue Abbott of the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program. Research was supported in part by a grant from the National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council through the USDA Forest Service Urban and Community Forestry Challenge Cost-Share Program.

References

Bendick, M. Jr., 1995. Rebuilding Inner-City Communities: A New Approach to the Nation's Urban Crisis. New York: Research and Policy Committee of the Committee for Economic Development.

Daily, G.C., 1997. Nature's Services: Societal Dependence on Natural Ecosystems. Island Press, Washington, DC.

U.S. Senate – 104th Congress. Revitalizing America's Rural and Urban Communities: Hearing Before the Committee on Small Business (S. HRG. 104-192). U.S. Government Printing Office. Washington, DC, 1995.

Wolf, K.L., 1998. Enterprising Landscapes: Business Districts and the Urban Forest. In Cities by Nature's Design, Proc. of the Eighth National Urban Forest Conference, C. Kollin (ed.). Washington, DC: American Forests.